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Business Retention and Expansion Visitation Fundamentals

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Preface

This publication is a guide to beginning a business retention and expansion (BR&E) visitation program.

Because of the wide variety of communities and business sectors in today's economy, this guide is written for the economic development professional and community leaders who may have little or no experience in the community economic development arena.

We encourage the user to read this guide thoroughly before making the BR&E visitation program decision. The publication contains a large number of issues that each program "champion," leadership team and community must address before this type of effort can be implemented successfully.

Our purpose is to provide a discussion and overall set of guidelines for implementing the program. However, it is not a comprehensive, step-by-step plan. Undoubtedly, many readers will have significant experience working in the community economic development area and should have no problem implementing the concepts presented here. For those with less experience in these areas who still would like to explore the possibility of this program for their community, we encourage you to contact your local or state Cooperative Extension Service or Business Retention and Expansion International at *www.brei.org*.

Acknowledgments

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The original manuals may be purchased from the NERCRD;
visit *http://nercrd.psu.edu* for additional details and information.

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What is a BR&E Visitation Program?

The primary objective of these materials is to describe a BR&E visitation program and the characteristics that make it successful.

A brief description might include the following:

A BR&E visitation program is a team effort that expresses interest in and concern for the issues faced by local businesses in the community. It consists of a survey activity that allows businesses to voice their concerns, an analysis activity that analyzes the surveys and identifies issues that need to be addressed, and strategic planning and implementation activities that mobilize educational, technical assistance and local policy resources that will address the issues faced by these communities.

Hints on Introducing a BR&E Visitation Program: Volunteer- or Developer-led

Communities that have no knowledge of the approach to conducting the BR&E visitation program process described in this guide have difficulty in evaluating whether it fits their needs. Communities that used a different approach and had disappointing results are less likely to want to do this program, at least until they understand the advantages of this type of visitation program.

The following tips are aimed at helping community leaders understand the visitation program approach to retain and expand businesses.

Many communities adopt this approach once they understand it. However, the program does not fit all communities at all times. Groups who are introduced to this design thoroughly can decide for themselves thoughtfully whether it fits their situation and if they are ready to implement the program.

Hint 1: Be sure you understand the program.

Before local initiators try to introduce the visitation program concept to a larger group, they must be able to answer many questions regarding how it differs from other BR&E programs. Once individuals have completed the orientation materials contained in Chapter 2, they will understand it very well.

Hint 2: Use the "Self-assessment Guide."

Often you will hear, "We already have done BR&E."

Maybe this is true; maybe it isn't. If the community recently has done BR&E visits in the same fashion as described in this course, then it likely should not do visits again, at least in the near future. To evaluate how earlier efforts compare with the one described here, complete the "Self-assessment Guide" in *Appendix A*.

Hint 3: Use a community DVD to show a sample program.

The DVD can say a lot of things you can't. Use Section 1 of the "Retaining and Expanding Business in Your Community" from the University of Minnesota Extension Service[1] or go to the Business Retention and Expansion International website *(www.brei.org)* for additional resources and BREI certified coordinators and professionals. For hints on how to introduce and use the DVD (Segment 1, "Retaining and Expanding Business in Your Community") effectively, see *Appendix B*.

[1] University of Minnesota Extension Store at (800) 876-8636.

Hint 4: Share samples of BR&E community survey reports and plans.

One of the more visible aspects of the program is the survey report. Share a copy of a nearby community's report with interested stakeholders in your area, but make sure the community is similar to your own. Try to get reports that list the names and positions of the local participants in the prior programs. Local leaders often will know some of those people and can contact them to see whether they would recommend the program. Sample reports can be found on the BREI website.[2]

Hint 5: Give examples of program benefits.

To learn about good examples of program benefits, read "The Community Information Meeting" (Chapter 2) and ask your BREI certified coordinator or professional for examples of a BR&E visitation program or the names of people who reside in communities that have undertaken this type of program.

Hint 6: Contact citizens in other communities.

In most cases, visiting with another community to learn about its experience in using the BR&E visitation program is a highly effective means of determining whether the program will work in your community. While a personal visit may be best, contacts can be made in alternative ways. Some groups do it by speakerphone or video conference *(See Appendix C:* "Question-and-answer Session With Experienced Local Leader," to learn how this might be done). Others split up a list of names and contact individuals by phone. Regardless of the method of contact, talking to citizens who have experienced this type of a business retention and expansion visitation program in other communities is the best means of understanding the benefits and costs of the program.

Introduction

Before we begin to discuss the different functions of the team members, we need to discuss the overall philosophy that must guide every action of people working with the program for the program to be successful. Unlike many other types of business retention and expansion visitation programs, the process described in this guide focuses on a core **team effort** (this team is referred to in these materials as the **leadership team**). While relying on a single individual may help get things done in the short run, it does little to develop a community's capacity to address crucial issues as they arise. Therefore, a team that consists of four to five active members can provide a tremendous boost to your community's economic development capacity.

As described in Chapter 2 (Community Information Meeting), each team member will need to know the roles of the other members for an effective team to be formed. A crucial role in the overall program's success is that of the **overall coordinator**. While this role will be discussed in much detail later, ensuring that this person understands and is able to perform all of the other roles in the program is imperative. The best way for the overall coordinator to learn about other parts of the program is to help at critical points in the process. The process has specific times during which no one individual can do it all. Your job (if you assume the overall coordinator role) will be to help leadership team members during these times or ask for help when **you** are responsible for coordinating a particular aspect of the program.[3]

In whatever role you fulfill, you, as a member of the program's leadership team, will help provide overall direction to the local BR&E visitation program. Each member of the team coordinates a specific part of the program. For whichever part of the program you choose to coordinate, the principle remains the same: You organize the effort to make sure that items are not omitted or unorganized. This means doing some of the work yourself but not **all** of it! As outlined later in more detail, your participation on the leadership team brings you a number of personal

[2] See the Business Retention and Expansion International website *(www.brei.org)* for additional resources that can be used by BREI certified coordinators and professionals

[3] BR&E coordinators will find related materials in Morse, George W. 1996. Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 in *BREI Consultant's Guidebook: Course for the Certification of BR&E Master Consultants*. Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.

benefits and rewards, but trying to perform all of the tasks yourself likely will lead to a great deal of frustration and an unsuccessful program.

By becoming familiar with the lessons in this guide, you will learn characteristics of a successful leadership team and the critical nature that the team plays in the BR&E visitation process.

You will become familiar with the roles of the leadership team and learn how these roles can contribute to the success of your program, as well as the benefits and costs of serving as a member of that team. Successful BR&E visitation programs split functions as outlined among several people rather than having an overall coordinator who does everything.

Benefits of Taking Leadership in a BR&E Visitation Program

The benefits of serving on the leadership team or its task force are real and significant. The following paragraphs describe some of the potential benefits you and your fellow participants might enjoy. You can decide which of these might be the most important as you recruit your team.[4]

High Visibility in Successful Programs

Being part of a highly visible, effective effort can help build credibility for other projects. Few economic development programs provide as much opportunity for visibility while also garnering as much success as the BR&E visitation program. Few economic development programs have the high success rate of the BR&E visitation program. Even in a relatively simple BR&E process, the program has seven or eight opportunities to get news coverage, thereby giving it high visibility.

Identification of Major Issues

If you've been a member of your community for a number of years, the survey results discussed later in this guide probably won't surprise you, but they will likely help you. As one former coordinator said, "I don't expect to learn anything new from this, but having the numbers will help me show other community leaders what is happening in our town, which will make my job a lot easier." Because few public-private partnerships in community economic development ventures can be done successfully without the broad consent of community leaders, the BR&E visitation program in any form can be helpful in revealing issues important to the community's businesses.

If you are new to the community or to economic development, the BR&E visitation program is a good way to become familiar with major issues. In addition, data from local firms can provide a basis for drawing conclusions and setting project priorities.

Improved Efficiency in Contacting Firms

Utilizing a team approach to this program can greatly increase the efficiency in determining business issues. Each firm visit will take about two hours (excluding travel and preparation time). If you tried to visit all the firms in a community by yourself, just providing an initial visit would take 60 to 200 hours, and you wouldn't have follow-up time for individual firm problems. Also, if you use a prepared and tested questionnaire for the firm visits, you don't have to spend time reinventing this part of the visitation process.

Opportunity to Learn About the Local Economic Structure

Most programs perform some analysis of the data collected during the firm visits. Furthermore, many state/provincial programs also provide information on local trends and the economic structure of the area or a community profile. This can give you a chance to assess the local economy and its best strategies for successful development. A community profile is crucial in benchmarking where you are today so you have something to measure against in the future.

[4] Smith, Thomas R., George W. Morse and Linda M. Lobao. 1992. Measuring Impacts of Business Retention and Expansion Visitation Programs. *Journal of the Community Development Society* .23 (1): 135-139.

Chance to Understand Local Leadership

No matter whether you are new or experienced in a leadership role, the BR&E visitation program will help you identify good partners for the future. If you are new to the economic development arena, you may be able to identify a good community and/or economic development mentor as part of this process. If you are experienced, you may identify someone to carry on and support what you have been doing. Strong programs in community or economic development depend on more than one person. A broad-based team of local leaders must be involved in developing a vision of future development and reaching consensus on the steps necessary to reach this vision.

Eligibility Requirements

If you are wondering if you are eligible to serve on the task force or leadership team, ask yourself these questions: Are you well-respected in the community? Can you systematically organize or conduct parts of the effort? Do you have any experience in community economic development or leading volunteer groups? If you were able to answer "yes" to any of these questions, then you're eligible. Some members of the leadership team should have experience in community economic development and leading volunteer groups.

You may be in a job in which your work with the local BR&E visitation program will count as a job assignment. If you are a retired executive, dedicated local businessperson or community member able to devote time to this effort, you are well-qualified to serve.[5] Your passion and love for your community are what qualify you, not previous knowledge or work experience (although these are certainly helpful).

While this section has presented the benefits of serving on the leadership team, you will get a better picture of the overall process and its benefits if you talk with an experienced member of a BR&E visitation leadership team from another community.

[5] Smith, Morse and Lobao, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

Community Informational Meeting

While the leadership team acts much like a board of directors in providing overall coordination and management for the program, this team cannot accomplish the goals of a BR&E visitation program by itself. While some of this is due to the logistics of the program, the overriding concern is that a program that doesn't involve a relatively large segment of the community does little to increase the community's capacity to enhance its economic development and quality of life.

This chapter provides the basis and information that the leadership team will need to host a community program.

While a large number of community members will show support for and some interest in the program, a number of stakeholders (probably 20 to 30) also will volunteer to work with the leadership team in carrying out the program's activities and developing a plan for the betterment of their community. This larger group typically is called the task force.

The task force will conduct the bulk of the firm visits if you are utilizing the volunteer visitor approach. The task force also can provide a great deal of useful insight for the planning process if you are using the volunteer visitor or developer-led approach. Above all, the task force legitimizes the program in the eyes of the community.

What is a BR&E Visitation Program?

Business Retention and Expansion (often simply called BR&E) includes all efforts to encourage the survival and growth of a community's existing businesses.

Examples of the hundreds of possibilities of BR&E programs include:

- Providing technical training for new employees
- Providing management seminars for employers
- Helping firms identify local sources of input supplies and materials
- Encouraging better labor/management relations
- Reducing the cost and upgrading the quality of local government services
- Establishing better school/workplace relations and fit
- Retaining youth in the community

All of these examples help firms become more productive and thus more competitive. These ideas don't try to hold the clock in place or roll it back. Instead, they help your local firms stay ahead of their competitors in other communities.

The concept presented in this guide uses a structured process for obtaining information to analyze area business needs in the local economic environment. This helps determine what technical assistance, educational programs or policies may be needed to move your community's economy forward. This will result in the development of strategic partnerships and collaborations to enhance the local business climate. A BR&E visitation program recognizes that few communities can do everything they would like to do to help their existing firms. Therefore, the local program leadership has to decide what types of efforts could provide the greatest targeted returns. Priorities depend on the types of firms in your community, the competitive pressures they are facing, the nature of your local public services and the quality of your labor force, as well as many other factors.

The focus of this training is a structured survey/interview process resulting in a community-based strategic planning effort.

Is a BR&E Visitation Program Right for Your Community?[1]

The BR&E visitation program can be the key in encouraging and facilitating economic development in your community. Whether you are a professional economic developer, a chamber of commerce member, a local government official, an educator or an interested citizen who wants to see your area become more economically diverse and resilient, you will be interested in this approach to economic development.

Successful implementation of the concepts presented here will help you understand the concepts of the development strategy and its benefits and costs, and what you and other concerned citizens need to do to have a successful program. These materials will help you decide whether to adopt this strategy, and, if you do, ways in which it can be implemented. They can help you see the possibilities for your own community. However, the final results depend upon you and your community and the fortitude or passion dedicated to implementing the program.

To help you decide if this approach fits your community, consider the following questions:

- Why are existing businesses important in local economic development?
- What is a BR&E visitation program?
- What are the BR&E visitation program objectives and processes?
- What roles do local citizens and leaders play in the program?
- What are the benefits to a community and individuals involved in the program?
- What are the costs of the program?
- What assistance may universities, state agencies or others provide?

Why Are Existing Businesses Important to Development?

Existing firms are engines of economic growth. Some studies estimate the percentage of new net jobs created by existing firms are as high as 80 percent, while the most conservative estimates say 40 percent.[2] When a community commits to working with its existing firms, it commits to working with a sector that is not only important to the future of the local economy, but one that already has invested significant resources of many types in the community.

Increasingly, communities are recognizing that paying attention to the survival and growth of their existing firms makes sense. While many communities have pursued policies designed to attract only outside firms to move into the area, such a strategy is not likely to be effective if existing businesses are not happy with the local business climate. The most effective strategy for economic development is a balance of creation, attraction, retention and expansion (CARE) strategies to maximize the impact of local economic development efforts.

What Are the BR&E Visitation Program Objectives and Process?

Most local BR&E visitation programs have the following objectives:

- Demonstrate to local businesses that the community appreciates their contribution to the local economy
- Help existing businesses solve current and potential problems
- Assist businesses in using available educational and technical assistance programs aimed at helping them become more competitive
- Develop strategic plans for long-range business retention and expansion activities
- Build community capacity to sustain growth and development

[1] This booklet complements Chapter 11 in Morse, George W. 1996. *BREI Consultant's Guidebook: Course for the Certification of BR&E Master Consultants*, St. Paul, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.

[2] Kraybill, David S., 1995, Retention and Expansion First. *Ohio's Challenge* 8 (2): 4-7.

What Roles Do Local Citizens and Leaders Play in the Program?

Many roles must be filled in a complete BR&E visitation program; these are described in detail in Chapter 3. This program contains a place for anyone who has a genuine desire to help the community address the needs and concerns of local businesses. All roles are critical to the program's success.

How the BR&E Visitation Program Benefits Communities and Volunteers

Benefits to Communities

- **Public relations with existing firms improve**

  BR&E visitation programs are focused on intensive, two-way conversations with area firms. This results in improved public relations. Research shows that demonstrating a pro-business attitude is rated as one of the greatest benefits of the program.[3] Firm owners involved in BR&E visitation programs have said: "This is the first time anyone has come to visit us and really listened to our opinion."

- **Firms receive help in solving problems**

  Firms often have concerns that require immediate attention. The BR&E approaches presented here can address many of these concerns effectively and quickly. For example, the Portage County, Ohio, BR&E visitation program provided business incentive information to 22 of the 69 firms visited. Four of these firms planned to make investments of more than $20 million that would result in the addition of 117 jobs.

  A St. Paul, Minn., firm owner mentioned during a BR&E visit that the firm might be forced to close due to a fire code problem. The BR&E visitation program contacted the St. Paul Port Authority, which worked with the firm and the fire department to develop a solution, thus saving 124 jobs.

  In reviewing the survey results, task force members in Harrisville, W.Va., learned that local firms were losing business and missing shipments because the road into town was poorly marked. The task force worked with state government to correct the problem.

- **Firms become more competitive**

  BR&E visitation programs that help firms reduce costs or increase values increase the firms' and the community's competitiveness. For example, the Taylor County, W. Va., BR&E task force found that workers lacked math skills, so the task force worked to establish a business-education partnership. This resulted in the development of a program that provides math training to workers. To encourage participation, a local greenhouse gave raises to workers who completed the program. With new and/or increased math skills, workers make fewer mistakes when they mix chemicals. This saves the company money and underscores its concern for environmental issues.

- **Communities develop action-based strategic plans for BR&E**

  Few communities can tackle all of the BR&E projects that could benefit local firms. The BR&E process helps the task force use collected data to reach a consensus on high-priority efforts. One study found that 100 percent of the most successful BR&E visitation programs had ***written*** action-based strategic plans.[4] For example, the Anaconda, Mont., BR&E visitation program developed an action-based strategic plan that resulted in the following projects:

- Beautification of the community's main entrance through the development of a golf course at the community's entrance, where an ugly hazardous waste site once existed
- Retention of a state-operated hospital, saving 500 jobs
- Development of business startup educational programs, resulting in 11 new businesses and the expansion of 17 home-based businesses[5]

[3] Smith, Thomas R., George W. Morse and Linda M. Lobao. 1992. Measuring Impacts of Business Retention and Expansion Visitation Programs. *Journal of Community Development Society* 23 (1): 127-128.

[4] Loveridge, Scott, and Thomas R. Smith. 1992. Factors Related to Success in Business Retention and Expansion Programs. *Journal of Community Development Society* 23 (2): 73-74.

[5] Morse, George. 1993. Retaining and Expanding Local Businesses: Strategies to Build Successful Programs. In *Building Your Community's Future Satellite Programs on Community Economic Development*, pp. 21-25. Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Western Illinois University, Macomb, Ill.

- **Communities build capacity for economic development efforts**

  The most important long-term benefit of this action-based approach to community and economic development is that it not only builds a community's capacity to address current needs of existing businesses, it also provides a foundation for other economic capacity-building efforts. Four important aspects of this improved approach are:

  1. Stronger collaborations among local development agencies, local governments, residents, educators and local businesses
  2. A better understanding by local leaders of the strengths and weaknesses of their community's local business climate
  3. Better communication among businesses and community leaders
  4. Better linkages to state and federal development assistance

A study of an Ohio BR&E program found that stronger collaboration among a wide variety of local leaders was largely due to the process used by the task force to deal with immediate individual concerns.[6] Also, if you want to attract new firms, you must understand your community's strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the business world. Few groups are in a better position to tell you what these are than your existing firms.

You will have more success in attracting new firms if you talk with your local firms first and understand your community's strengths and weaknesses.

For example, Fayette County, Ohio, had a long-standing reputation as having a poor labor climate due to strikes that occurred more than 20 years earlier. However, the BR&E survey found that labor/management relations at the time of the survey were very good. The local task force used this information to market the community successfully to several new industrial prospects.[7] Although many economic development programs focusing on industrial attraction do not operate on a countywide basis, many BR&E programs do. This enables communities of varying sizes to pool their resources to help existing firms compete.

Benefits to Volunteers

Citizens and local leaders who have worked with the BR&E visitation program cite the following reasons why they have been active participants[8]:

- **The BR&E visitation program is *fun***

  We guarantee you will have *fun*! Most people say, "This is fun" after completing the first firm visit. You'll enjoy socializing with community leaders and residents and participating in important community decisions.

- **The BR&E visitation program *builds networks***

  You can *build networks* with local businesses and leaders, as well as with regional and state economic development professionals. These contacts often will help your business or future development efforts.

- **The BR&E visitation program is a *learning experience***

  You will *learn* about your local economy's characteristics, strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of local businesses and gain insights on how your community is likely to develop in the future. You also will learn about new methods for working with existing firms and ways you can help shape your community's destiny.

- **The BR&E visitation program brings the community *together***

  In many communities, citizens and local leaders are thinking about their future, but they're not working *together* to have an impact on the future. The BR&E visitation program is an excellent tool that can be used to bring your community *together*. Business people, local government officials, education officials, professional developers and interested citizens all work *together* in this type of program for the benefit of existing local businesses and their community.

[6] McLaughlin. *op. cit.*, pp. 176-180.

[7] Morse, George W., Robert McLaughlin and Ellen Hagey. 1990. Success Stories in R&E Business Visitation Programs. In *The Retention and Expansion of Existing Businesses*, edited by G. Morse, p. 137. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

[8] McLaughlin, Robert T. 1990. Making Connections through R&E: An Educator's Case Study. In *The Retention and Expansion of Existing Businesses*, edited by G. Morse, pp. 166-182. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

- **BR&E visitation program is *doable* and it gets *results***

  Citizens such as you and your neighbors have implemented this program in all sizes and types of communities. Excellent BR&E visitation programs have been completed in rural, suburban and urban areas with *meaningful results*. Working on projects that are feasible and achieve *results* is naturally more rewarding.

- **BR&E visitation program demonstrates that "we *care* about business"**

  Just visiting firms to ask about their concerns *demonstrates* that your community *cares* about its local businesses and appreciates their economic and social contributions to the area. You may be surprised by how many business leaders feel unappreciated and have not been told personally that the community values them.

- **BR&E visitation program implementation is *low risk but only if done correctly***

  If you follow the guidelines in these manuals, the BR&E visitation program is *safe*. As a local leader said, "How can you possibly lose?"[9]

Volunteer Time: Cost or Value?

If you have a home garden, how do you estimate the cost of your time? Do you simply take your average hourly wage times the hours you work? Or, because you enjoy gardening, do you assume your time is free or that you should charge yourself an entertainment fee? It's not clear-cut, is it?

We run into the same problem when estimating the cost (or value) of volunteer time for the BR&E visitation program. Because most people consider that visiting firms is fun, estimating the value of their time as a cost might be incorrect. However, if you attempt to quantify this contribution, citizens and local leaders collectively will contribute more than $25,000 in volunteer labor to a BR&E visitation program.

How Long Does the Program Take?

A complete BR&E visitation program likely will take two or more years to complete if the strategic plan development and implementation is included. Organizing the local leadership team and task force usually takes one to two months, while the firm visits and action-based strategic planning efforts take four to nine months. The remainder of the time is devoted to implementing the plan.

Local economic development efforts take time, and recruiting the leadership team and task force members on the promise that the program commitments would be completed in six to nine months would be a mistake. That promise would forecast a program that develops a strategic plan that will sit on the shelf and never be implemented.

How Many Hours Are Required Per Person?

The greatest amount of time is spent by the leadership team, followed by the task force and then the volunteer visitors. All three groups typically visit firms. In addition, the task force meets to set policy and consider the survey results and future actions. Often, the leadership team convenes between task force meetings to set the stage and coordinate effective task force and community meetings.

> "A complete BR&E visitation program likely will take two or more years to complete if the strategic plan development and implementation is included."

[9] McLaughlin, op. cit., pp. 172. While this is a quote of a local leader, the authors have seen a number of programs that had problems. The program carries risks, especially if the basic principles are not followed.

Table 1: *Summary of Estimated Time Commitments of BR&E Visitation Participants[10]

Participants	Number of Participants Per Program	During Visits and Planning Phase (4 to 9 months)	During Implementation Phase (1 to 2 years)
	Total Hours Per Person		
Local Citizens and Leaders			
Overall Coordinator	1	70	40
Other Leadership Team Members	3-4	45	30
Task Force Members	25-30	20	20
Volunteer Visitors	25-30	10-20	0
Firm Owner/Operators	30-100	1-3	0
Technical Assistants			
BREI Certified Coordinator or Professional	1	100	30
Computer Technician	1	25-45	0
Report Writer	1	100	0

* Includes time spent in meetings. Time spent on implementing projects varies considerably based on priorities identified and individual skills.

Cost of Doing the Applied Research

If you use an outside researcher, you will have costs for entering the data, doing the computer work, analyzing the results, writing and printing the reports, and traveling to the community to present the results. Even if you perform these functions internally, you incur almost the same costs (minus travel). Combined with the time and travel of a BREI certified coordinator or professional, these costs can total several thousand dollars per program.

Fees Charged to Communities (if using an outside researcher)

Outside researchers charge fees ranging from zero to several thousand dollars for each program. The difference between the costs mentioned in the preceding paragraph (the assumption is that the community has the resources to cover these direct costs to the program) and researcher-charged fees is paid from a variety of public and private agencies, depending on the state. You'll need to check with your state's sponsoring or economic development agency to determine the fees in your area. Also, commercial products are on the market that will help you analyze your data and generate reports.

Other Local Costs

In addition to program fees, you need to plan for expenses associated with mailings and meetings. Plan on postage and photocopying expenses of about $15 to $20 per targeted firm. Effective volunteer participation also requires meeting notification through postal service mail, email or, depending on the composition of your volunteer group, social media methods. Volunteer participation usually is enhanced if a small amount of money is available for light refreshments at meetings. Recruiting a strong local leadership team is critical to obtaining sufficient financial support for an effective program.

What Assistance Do Universities, State Agencies and Others Provide?

Virtually all BR&E visitation programs have written reports detailing the program's findings.[11] The written research report is important because it summarizes the data from your surveys and presents it in a strategic problem-solving framework. In addition, the report (or a written summary) should show which projects your group considered and which were adopted as priorities.

[10] This estimate assumes that the BR&E certified coordinator or professional provides the assistance outlined throughout this guide. If this person also plays the role of the overall coordinator or local champion, the time will be the sum of the various roles.

[11] Loveridge and Smith. *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

The report should list the problems (as reported by firms visited), the solutions (as developed by the task force and others) and commitments to act (the names of people on your task force who agree to help with specific projects).

Is having an outside researcher write the report better than having a local person do it? Having an outside researcher write the report is not necessary, but that option has several advantages:

- Objectivity on causes of local problems
- New perspectives on potential solutions
- Access to a range of expert opinions and resources
- Professionalism in the content and presentation of the report

Many states have a department of economic development, state chamber of commerce or a large utility company that will analyze the data and prepare a research report. This role also often is performed by Extension faculty at your state's land-grant university. Check with your state development agency, local development professionals, BREI coordinator/professional or local Extension office for information on who does this in your state. Many state economic development departments have purchased state licenses for commercial software for data analysis, so check with them to see if a site license is available to you and at what cost.

How Can I Learn More About This Program Before I Decide?

Visit Other Towns

Your best bet is to talk with local leaders in a community that has implemented this type of program. If you have the time and funds available, travel to one of these communities to visit with its leadership team and task force members.

Teleconference or Videoconference

However, if you don't have the time or funds available to visit other programs, an excellent alternative is to watch the videos on the BREI website *(www.brei.org)*. You then can interview one or more local leaders from another program by using a speaker phone, voice over the Internet, webinar or other distance learning technique (specialized equipment may be available at the local community college or other educational institution, including your local Extension Service office). Communities have had excellent results with this method of contacting leaders in other towns; tips on making it work can be found in *Appendix C:* "Question-and-answer Session With Experienced Local Leader."

For names and phone numbers of people to call, contact Business Retention and Expansion International or your BR&E coordinator or professional.

Contact a Certified BR&E Coordinator or Professional

Certified BR&E coordinators and professionals are individuals who have received specialized training on the process of organizing a BR&E visitation program by the Business Retention and Expansion International (BREI) professional association. They also are backed by an international system that can provide assistance to local groups wishing to start BR&E visitation programs (these individuals often provide this assistance at no charge as part of their employment). To find out more, visit the BREI website at *www.brei.org*.

Think You've Already Done a Similar Program?

Use the "Self-assessment Guide for Communities" in *Appendix A*. The program your community previously undertook very likely is not the same type of program described in this guide. Talking to stakeholders involved to determine where the previous program failed to meet expectations could be beneficial. Once this is accomplished, you should be able to re-examine this chapter and determine if the approach described in this guide can satisfy your community's needs.

Is Our Community Ready to Do the BR&E Visitation Program?

BR&E visitation programs require a lot of work. Naturally, you want to avoid the embarrassment of starting a program when a community is not prepared to complete it successfully. If your state has no formal application or assessment process, you can use the following questions to see if you are ready. If you cannot answer all of these affirmatively, you need to do some more preparation.

- Is the community ready to undertake a BR&E visitation program?
- Is it interested in the issues of existing businesses?
- Is it willing and able to invest in a strategic planning effort to address the needs of local businesses?
- Does it have the resources to address the immediate critical needs of local businesses?
- Does it have the willingness to follow up on business requests for education and assistance?
- Is a local champion available to organize and monitor the progress of the overall BR&E visitation program effort? Is a group of 12 or more committed people willing to take leadership for the entire BR&E process?

The objective is this chapter is to provide an overview of a BR&E visitation program that can be shared with the community at a public meeting. While a number of questions have been answered regarding the process and its benefit to the community, community members undoubtedly will have more questions. The BREI website is an excellent source of further information on technical assistance.

Also, remember that one of the leadership team's prime objectives in hosting this meeting is to recruit members for the task force and perhaps other residents who would like to participate in the program as volunteer visitors but do not wish to be part of the overall planning process. While volunteers participate in the program for many different reasons, leadership team members should remain alert during the informational meeting to determine these "triggers."

Once task force members and volunteer visitors are identified, the leadership team should make every effort to keep these individuals involved by making sure they receive the experience from the process that they expected.

Introduction

For any community or economic development program to be successful, each member of the task force team (in this case, the team that implements and coordinates the BR&E program) must have a solid understanding of his/her role. However, these roles vary substantially according to the type of visitation program selected.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the overall basic process of a business retention and expansion program consists of firm visits, immediate follow-up activity, data analysis and planning, and implementation. These basic activities then are followed by a "celebration or commencement" at the end of the initial strategic planning stage (if the community has a strategic planning stage). However, the roles in accomplishing the individual tasks in the program can be quite varied, depending on the program selected.

Communities have several approaches to conducting business retention and expansion programs. For the purpose of this publication, we are only going to present the volunteer- and developer-led approaches. These two approaches are very similar.

The volunteer visitor approach as presented by Morse, Loveridge and Hushak, as well as many others, consists of a community-oriented volunteer leadership team of four to five people and a local task force that leads the process. This group typically is assisted by a BREI certified coordinator or professional who is knowledgeable about the BR&E visitation process.

In this process, firm visitors are recruited and trained to visit firms with the intention of completing a BR&E survey adopted by the task force. Teams of trained volunteers then visit selected firms in the community and record the answers to the survey questions, along with any other comments that may result from the conversation.

Completed surveys and accompanying notes then are analyzed immediately by a person or small team of the task force. The analysis team prepares a comprehensive report of the survey to identify firm needs. The task force members/economic developer follow up immediately with the companies for additional information if needed or just to say that they are working on the issue. Then they work with local educational, governmental or technical assistance and other resource providers to address individual company problems.

When all individual surveys have gone through the red flag review, a research or survey analysis report is developed. The report should be shared with the community in a "town hall" format much like the one used in introducing the BR&E concept. Ideally, this meeting should initiate a community planning process with goals, objectives and strategies targeted at retaining and expanding existing businesses. At the end of this meeting, an invitation to join the task force and assist in refining and finalizing the community's BR&E strategic plan is offered.

The type of community planning process recommended for use in a BR&E visitation program is strategic planning based on the information gathered from the firms. This plan includes the names of individuals, departments or agencies that have agreed to take the lead in implementing the strategies identified. Several types of planning processes are available, and the BR&E leadership team and task force should choose the one that works best for their particular community. Valuable assistance in this effort may be available from your local Extension office.

At this point, the community usually prepares for a commencement to celebrate its accomplishments. However, the work has just begun. The real effort is involved in implementing the plan and making sure

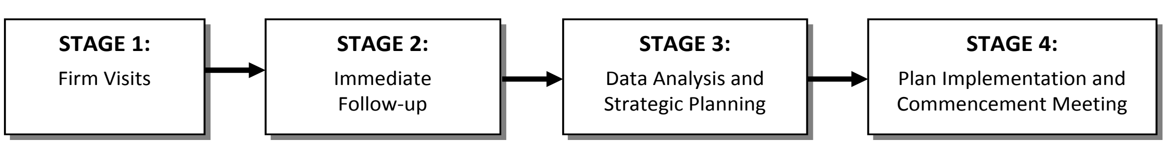

Figure 1. Stages of the BR&E visitation process

that continued conversations and follow-up are achieved with the community's businesses (whether they were selected to participate in the survey or not). **Figure 2** on Page 22 is a flow diagram of this approach.

The developer-led approach is a variation on the volunteer visitor theme. It is very similar to the volunteer visitor process except that the local economic developer (or economic development team) provides overall leadership for the process, often because this person or entity is acting as the champion for the project.

This process closely follows the volunteer visitor format. Note that the economic developer/development team makes a concerted effort to keep the community involved in the process.

The volunteer- and developer-led approaches ensure that the community is very involved and knowledgeable about the BR&E program. They create the most social capital, or interaction, and team building and address individual business needs, as well as the needs of the business community as a whole. Because these two approaches involve a face-to-face interview, the refusal rate is very low.

These approaches rate high on getting business leaders to talk with school, city and county leaders. The disadvantage of a volunteer-led approach may be in the sustainability of the effort. It could be compromised by a change in the amount of time or energy an individual has to devote to the effort. When someone makes this work part of his or her job as in the developer-led approach, the likelihood that the effort will be completed successfully is greater.

Task Force Composition

The BR&E task force, with a core leadership team of four to five people, is the team that provides the overall coordination for the process.

Description and Roles[12]

The BR&E task force usually consists of 10 to 20 people who act much like a board of directors for the program. Task force responsibilities for both processes include:

- Setting the overall policies for the program (for example, the types of industries to target, the number of firms to visit, the number of visits per team)
- Assisting in securing endorsements for the program from local educational, technical assistance, governmental, etc., organizations
- Providing follow-up educational and technical assistance on red and yellow flag issues where appropriate
- Reviewing the research results and setting the priorities for long-term BR&E-related projects
- Planning the community celebration/commencement meeting
- Participating, as appropriate, in the implementation of the projects identified in the strategic planning process
- Participating in follow-up planning and reporting sessions to maximize the potential of the BR&E and subsequent strategic planning/implementation processes

In addition, task forces that implement a standard volunteer- or developer-led visitor approach should be prepared to assume the following responsibilities:

- Recruit sufficient firm visitors to conduct the program (depending on the number of businesses to be surveyed, each task force member should be prepared to recruit two to three visitors for a total of 20 to 40 visitors)
- Attend the firm visitation orientation and visit two to three firms each

[12] BR&E coordinators will find related materials in Chapters 4 and 5 of Morse, George W. 1996. *BREI Consultant's Guidebook: Course for the Certification of BR&E Master Consultants*, Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.

Each task force member will need to contribute about 20 hours prior to the community commencement meeting. This is spread over several months and usually will result in an average of less than one hour per week of effort. Some task force members will spend more time with the process because they become very involved in helping businesses with immediate concerns, but this involvement is typically part of their "day job" responsibilities.

Each task force member's specific responsibilities for ongoing implementation are determined after the projects are identified.

Diversity of Task Force Membership

As illustrated, the BR&E task force should consist of five different groups of community leaders: (1) business leaders, (2) development professionals, (3) local government officials, (4) education officials and (5) other key community leaders. The task force needs this diversity because each category can contribute to the solution of local business and economic problems. For example, business owners should have the best understanding of the problems expressed in the surveys that relate to business operations.

School officials have been able to help start school/business partnerships and format educational programs to address business needs. Local elected officials need to learn about concerns with public services. Finally, professional economic developers often have information on local, state/provincial and federal programs that firms need. Research has shown that groups with a broad-based task force are more likely to implement their priority projects than those that do not have one.[13]

If you live in a sparsely populated area, you may feel you can't get a representative from each of the five groups. However, experience has shown that almost every community can find someone in each of these roles. They may not live in your community, but their professional service area includes your community. Be sure to invite them to participate.

Task Force Skills

What skills do you need to be an effective task force member? The task force needs to include, but not necessarily be limited to, recognized community leaders. Recognized leaders are required at the times when a community needs an action-oriented or influential group. Some of these situations include:

- When the immediate concerns of the firms need to be addressed
- When projects are selected
- When projects are presented to the public

Task force members need a basic understanding of the local economy and must be able to work easily with others to be effective. But above all, task force members need to have a demonstrated passion for and commitment to the community's businesses.

Specific Task Force Roles for the Leadership Team

The task force typically has four to five people who are willing to take on specific leadership roles and are referred to as the leadership team. Without a team, the BR&E process runs the risk of major disruptions if a single individual becomes seriously ill or resigns. While specific leadership team roles are described below, every member of the leadership team must assume two roles.

First, you must attend team meetings regularly and familiarize yourself with the roles of other leadership team members. Understanding the material in this guide will provide that information so you can offer assistance to others when they need it. Also, remember that every member of the leadership team is a member of the task force and should be willing to perform the duties expected from that role.

If the volunteer visitor process is being used, leadership team members also should be willing to work with other task force members and volunteer visitors to visit firms, collect data and provide input into the planning process. We recommend that all leadership team members make at least one practice visit and one to three additional visits to support the effort.

[13] Allanach, Christopher B. 1995. The Market for and Impacts of Business Retention and Expansion Programs. MS Thesis, Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minn.

Local Champion/Overall Coordinator Role

As with any successful community economic development program, someone has to be the spark plug with a passion for the program's success. This spark plug for the BR&E program is the local champion or, more commonly, the overall coordinator for the program. In many cases, this person also will serve in one of the other leadership team roles. However, in some cases, the role of the overall coordinator is complex enough that this is the only role the person will assume.

In any case, the overall coordinator's duties include working with the BR&E certified coordinator/professional to plan and monitor the overall progress of the effort, convening the task force, and serving as the task force meeting chair and primary contact and spokesperson for the program.

Three or four members of the task force should agree to share BR&E program leadership roles with the overall coordinator. These roles typically include:

- Media relations leader, who helps coordinate media coverage
- Business resources leader, who helps organize the team to respond to the firms' urgent and immediate concerns
- Milestone meeting facilitator, who helps organize the task force retreat (survey analysis report), community report/input meeting and community commencement meeting
- Firm visitation director, who helps organize the task force and visitation teams to prepare for the firm visits

Media Relations Role

What attributes do you need to be able to handle media relations in association with the program? If you have good people skills, you probably can do this job. You don't need to be a good writer or work for a news organization if you can establish positive contacts with the news media and explain the program enthusiastically. To be effective, this person must be a full participant in leadership team activities so that media coverage accurately reflects the program's progress.

Media coverage is often most effective if you and other members of the task force take the time to establish personal relationships with the news organizations that are targeted to provide coverage of the local BR&E program events. Inviting news organizations to participate in the various events can help you get more effective coverage than "after the fact" notification. Often the overall coordinator assumes this role as well.

The media relations role includes the following responsibilities:

- Help other members of the leadership team
- Visit firms
- Establish contacts with the media
- Provide copy to media

Establish Contacts With the Media

This person must make personal contacts with the local news media to explain the program or arrange for someone else to make these contacts. In either case, the media must be kept up to date on the progress of the program and invited to attend local BR&E events. Often the media relations leader arranges media interviews for the rest of the leadership team.

Provide Copy to Media and Leads to Radio and TV

The BR&E visitation process has at least six stages at which the news media might be interested in the program. At these stages, news releases are written and provided to media outlets. If you wish, you can prepare your own news release or use the examples of news releases that are included at the end of this manual in *Appendix D*.

Newspaper coverage is not the only source of publicity for a BR&E visitation program, however. Radio interviews, television coverage, newsletters, websites, social networking avenues and emailed informational bulletins are excellent methods of informing the community and state about your community's work with local businesses and efforts to promote economic development.

Business Resources Leader Role

The role of understanding the community's business resources and the ability to apply or utilize them in the BR&E program is extremely important. People skills are obviously important for this role, and knowledge of local, state and federal programs to help business also can be an asset. If you assume this role, your job will be to organize immediate follow-up to individual business concerns and information needs. The long-term success of a BR&E visitation program depends largely on the effectiveness of handling this follow-up because tangible early successes help keep the team energized for carrying out the long-range plans for community action.

The individual business concerns often are called "red and yellow flag issues" because of their important or urgent nature, or requests that were made require a timely response. Red flag issues are those that require immediate follow-up. Yellow flag issues are those that do not demand immediate follow-up but must be addressed in the near future.

The role and responsibilities of the leadership team and task force to follow up on these immediate concerns are outlined in this section. Immediate follow-up work can be very tedious and time-consuming if you tackle it alone. The best follow-up work is accomplished in a cooperative fashion.

This role has the following responsibilities:

- Help other members of the leadership team.
- Visit firms.
- Establish contacts with state or federal agencies that can help local firms.
- Prepare localized fact sheet on development programs.
- Organize the "review of surveys" by the task force.
- Mail thank you notes and the localized fact sheets to firms after the visits.
- Assign a task force member to coordinate an immediate response for each red flag business concern.
- Assign task force members to coordinate a response for each yellow flag business concern.
- Follow up on business information requests.

Contacts With State/Provincial or Federal Agencies

Effective BR&E visitation follow-up often requires help from state/provincial and/or federal agencies. Contact your state/provincial BR&E sponsor or state development agency for a "starter" list of programs. Having economic development agency program staff who are familiar with the local BR&E visitation program is helpful. If the program staff are not familiar with this type of program, ask task force members to contact them and concisely explain the local BR&E visitation process.

Localized Fact Sheets on Local, State and Federal Programs

Many BR&E visitation programs have prepared short (one-page) fact sheets with the names and telephone numbers of key local, state and federal program contacts. Some fact sheets also give a very short description of the program. Don't let this aspect become overwhelming so that nothing is available.

Development agencies often can help you with this. Your state/provincial sponsor should be able to provide a list of state/provincial and federal programs that can meet some of the needs identified by individual firms. In some states, this information is provided in a format that visitors can use during firm visits.

Mailing Thank You Notes and Localized Fact Sheets

The need to mail thank you notes to firms that participate in the survey process is obvious and provides an opportunity to send the fact sheets to them as a follow-up service. The visitation director (discussed more fully below) should be able to give you a list of names and addresses of firms visited. Doing this mailing within one or two weeks of the firm visits is best. This means the fact sheet must be ready before the visitor training.

Organizing "Red and Yellow Flag" Review of Surveys

After10 to 15 surveys are returned to the visitation director, small groups of task force members meet to review the surveys. The types of firms and the needs reported by the visiting team determine who is on the team.

The business resources leader organizes these meetings. The purpose of this review is to identify specific ways that the BR&E visitation program can provide assistance to each firm and to assign the responsibility to one or more of the task force members for working with each firm. Typically, completing the survey review process takes three or more meetings, depending on the number of interviews completed.

If you want tangible results from your program, this is probably the most important step in the process. This is the stage at which you address individual concerns of the firms.

The process used for review is as follows:[14]

1. The person who assumes this role photocopies the surveys but omits the cover sheets with the firms' names and the first page, which includes the employment and products produced. **If this information is not removed, the review process violates the confidentiality promised to each of the firms during the visits.** See *Appendix E* for a sample confidentiality agreement.
2. Divide the task force into small groups of three. Have each group review three surveys, and be sure that each person in the group reads all three surveys. Next, have the small groups complete the "Follow-up Worksheets," which outline the nature of the problems, suggested follow-up and the resource person who might be able to handle this *(see Appendix F:* "Follow-up Suggestions and Red Flags"). You already may have a similar worksheet, or you may need to modify the form to match your questionnaire.
3. All recommendations for follow-up then are discussed with the resource coordinator. If immediate follow-up is needed in a red flag situation, the local economic developer or other local leader with the qualifications to contact the business will be notified. Yellow flags are noted with a timeline for recommended follow-up. Information needs also are identified by the reviewers and listed for the business resource leader to address.
4. The next step is to reconvene the entire task force, have the small groups report their suggestions for general follow-up of yellow flag and information needs, and assign responsible parties.

This type of review process helps address the immediate concerns of local firms and helps local leaders understand the long-term major concerns of firms, which are addressed formally after the data are fully tabulated. By reviewing the individual surveys, the task force has a stronger grasp of the nature of these concerns, which makes using the long report of results easier to do later in the process and gives task force members time to think about various options for handling the problems that firms mention.

In early programs, the person who assumed this role summarized the surveys and then shared the summarized comments with task force members. You should avoid this. This approach is not as good as a direct review because it not only takes more time for the business resources person to complete, but responses to questions are easier to understand if the reviewers can examine the entire questionnaire.

Groups that have used the full-survey review process have been very satisfied with it, and it helps the task force work together.

Assign Task Force Members to Follow-up

Due to the extensive knowledge of the business resources leader regarding the availability of resources available to the community's businesses, he/she should have a tremendous amount of input in assigning follow-up activities to task force members. Whether assignments are made by the entire task force or allocated on a volunteer basis, the person assuming the business resources role must keep track of who is doing what.

[14] This "red flag" review process sometimes is called the "Dete/Hileman Red Flag Review Process" after John Dete and Dale Hileman, who developed this approach into a useful tool. If you want more information on the approach, read Chapter 11 in *The Retention and Expansion of Existing Business*, (G, Morse Ed.), Iowa State University Press, 1990.

Milestone Meeting Facilitator

If you accept the challenging role of facilitating the milestone meetings, you will arrange three important meetings: the task force retreat (survey analysis report), community report/input meeting and community commencement meeting.

Most importantly, you will help the community planning group (the task force with additional community members added after the community report of the survey analysis) to decide which long-range issues raised in the BR&E visitation survey can be changed by community action. Once these priorities are set, you will help facilitate accomplishing the goals. To effectively carry out this role, you need some experience in planning large events and creating collaborations among various entities that often have divergent and even conflicting interests. The specific items that need to be accomplished are:

- Help other members of task force
- Visit firms
- Make arrangements for the community survey report/input meeting
- Make arrangements for the community strategic planning meeting
- Make arrangements for the community commencement meeting

Visitation Director

(further details are provided in Chapter 4: Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation)

If you are considering overseeing the firm visitation process, you will need to be able to manage the following program components:

- Introduction of the program to local businesses
- Organize firm visitor training
- Oversee distribution of information
- Track the progress of firm visitors in completing their visits

A more detailed discussion was developed for the visitation director role and is contained in Chapter 4: *Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation*. It contains detailed information for training visitors, including a visitation guide and discussion of how to train the firm visitors. Therefore, this section only deals with one aspect of your responsibilities: coordinating the practice visits.

Practice Firm Visits in the Community

The local BRE leadership team (consisting of all the members) should participate in at least one, but preferably two, practice firm visits prior to the visitor training. Participating in practice visits will help the leadership team answer questions volunteers may ask about firms during their visitation training. These "practice" visits are "real" visits; the concerns of the firms should be addressed and the survey should be copied to be sent in with the other surveys. Below are some tips on doing the practice visits:

- Choose any firm, but go to two different types of firms.
- Participate! All members of the leadership team need to visit at least one firm.

This is particularly true for team members who think they do not need to go or who talk about having experience doing this. If their experience and biases are different than what will be recommended during the visitor training, going through the visits as is recommended is very important. Then if they want to suggest differences, that is OK. But some of the "20-year experts" in economic development do not know how to do the visits correctly or, much more importantly, do not understand the purpose of the firm visit in this type of program. Demonstrating the best way to do a firm visit is much better than having to debate these points in front of all the firm visitors.

Here are some other steps when conducting practice visits:

- Send firms a copy of the letter and survey before the visits. You can mail, email or hand-deliver the cover letter and survey to the firm. Be sure you have the most current survey before doing this, and invest time in a follow-up phone call to ensure that the business owner or manager received the documents.
- Handle immediate follow-up from visits. The practice visits are the official visits for these particular firms. The leadership team needs to handle the follow-up in the same fashion as the task force would later. Every firm is important!
- Complete the *Appendix G*: "Report on Practice Visits" as a follow-up to the practice visits.

The leadership team and, to a large extent the task force, obviously will have to meet often throughout the process. Picking a central location and meeting there consistently throughout the BR&E visitation process is best for the long term.

Some communities prefer to rotate the meeting place, reasoning that the leadership team and task force can spread out the commuting costs, which can create problems. This approach raises a few concerns. First, meeting tools and equipment may not be available on-site. Second, rotating the meetings means that someone must make sure everyone knows where the group is meeting each time. You also must choose a room that is appropriate to the size of the group that will be meeting.

If your 20-person task force meets in a room built for 100 people, task force members may conclude you wanted more people but couldn't get enough interest. If you try to squeeze your 20-person task force into the 10-person room you use for leadership team meetings, claustrophobia or climate problems are likely to crowd out creative thinking about local business problems. Furthermore, with a rotating venue, some individuals may choose to attend only those meetings that are scheduled in the location that is convenient for them. If several members are only an occasional participant, overall effectiveness of the team will be reduced.

The process and typical time frame for the BR&E visitation process is shown in Figure 2.

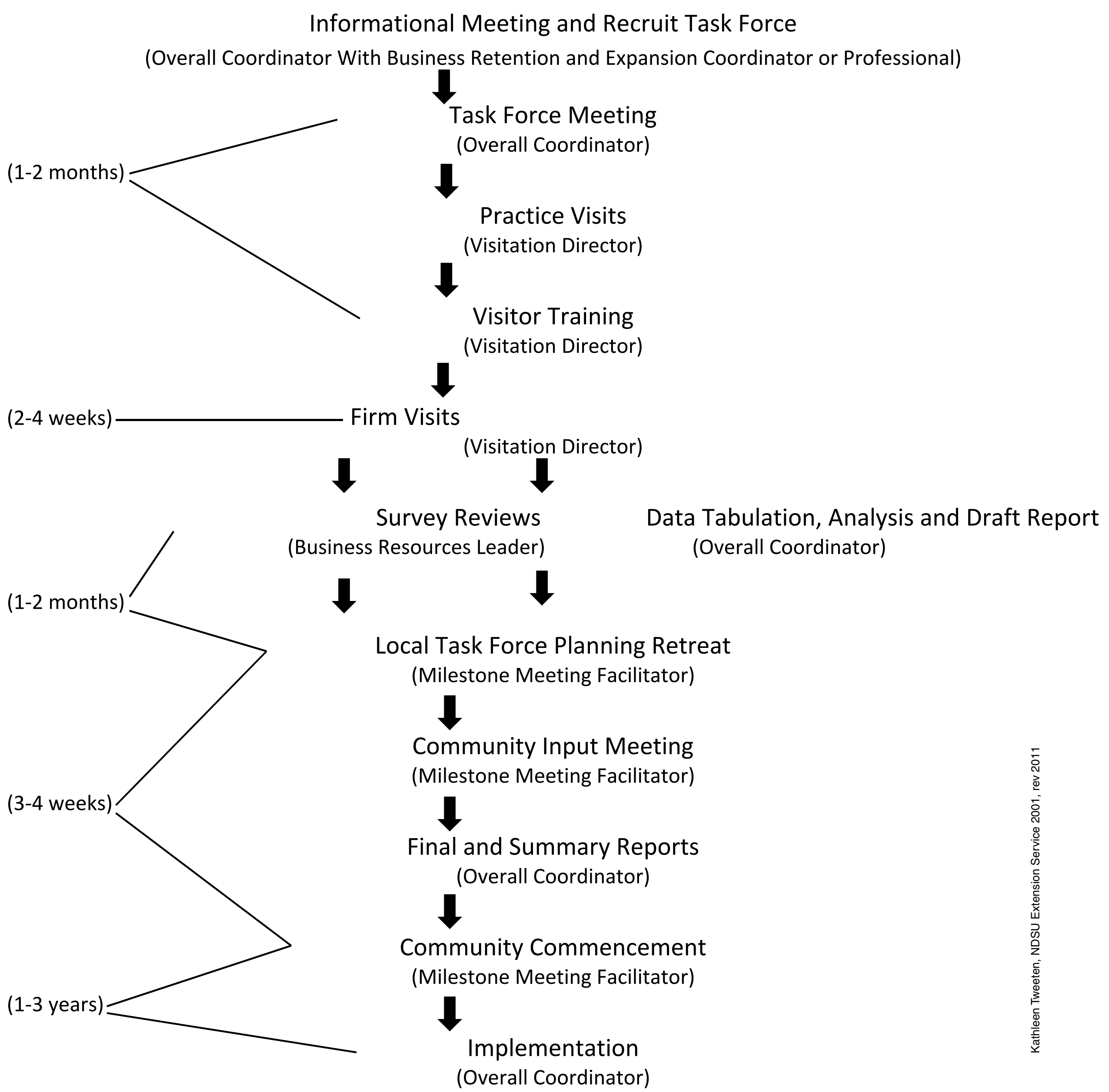

Figure 2. Flow Diagram for BR&E Volunteer- or Developer-led Approach

Task Force Orientation

Providing the task force with a practical application of its roles will impart a solid understanding of these roles to all team members. While other sections of the materials address community preparation and visitor training, the goal of this chapter is to provide an overview for the entire task force and develop a plan of work to guide the program. The following sample meeting agenda provides an overview/orientation for the task force and outlines many of the critical aspects of this vital part of the BR&E visitation program.

Task Force Overview and Orientation Meeting

Participants:

- Leadership team and task force members
- BR&E coordinator (BREC) or BR&E professional (BREP) (These are certifications provided by Business Retention and Expansion International. Additional information can be found at *www.brei.org*.)

Purpose:

By the end of the orientation and overview meeting, the task force members will be able to:

- Explain the goals of the program and how it works
- Determine the number and type of firms to be visited
- Suggest several additional local questions for the survey
- Recruit another person or two as firm visitors
- Select a date for the firm visitor training

Distribute in Advance:

- BR&E Task Force Brochure. This goes with a letter announcing the date, time, location, agenda and list of those invited to the meeting. All those invited are personally contacted before the letter is mailed.

Suggested Agenda (two hours):

First Hour: Introduce the Program

- Opening remarks (coordinator) ....10 minutes
- Review purpose of meeting and BR&E visitation program (coordinator) ....5 minutes
- Show DVD of impact that a BR&E program has had on a community............15 minutes
- Explain role and expectations of the task force and leadership team ....5 minutes
- Small groups develop questions ....10 minutes
- Resource person (optional) ....15 minutes

Second Hour: Task Force Decisions

- Determine the number and type of firms to visit...30 minutes
- Discuss addition of two to three local questions...20 minutes
- Task force members to recruit firm visitors ....5 minutes
- Select dates for visitor training...................5 minutes

Discussion of Agenda

First Hour: Introduce the BR&E program

The first hour of the task force orientation meeting should be devoted to familiarizing the task force members with the overall goals of the BR&E program and providing the task force members with an opportunity to have input into the issues that the program will address. The task force members must understand the potential of this type of program, and often the easiest method for making sure they do is the presentation of a case study that demonstrates the process and how a particular community has been affected. References to several DVDs of this type may be found on the BREI website *(www.brei.org)* under the Members Only section if you are certified, or visit with your BREI coordinator or professional.

Having a live conversation with a person who is a local leader in a community that has experienced a BR&E visitation program also can be helpful. In most cases, this leader will not be able to attend the meeting; however, the use of a speaker phone, distance education equipment or computer conferencing software to enable a question-and-answer session likely will prove to be a unique learning experience for the task force members.

Having the task force develop a small set of questions (two to four) specific to the local area that address pressing issues also may be advantageous. Examples of these types of issues are:

- Should our town merge with another?
- Should we endorse the metro telecommunication system?
- Should we endorse the building of a YWCA?
- Should the chamber of commerce continue activity X?

Second Hour: Task force decisions

The second hour of the orientation meeting should be devoted to making critical decisions that will guide the program and significantly influence the development of the plan of work (see below). If the targeted industry or firm size was not chosen after the meeting that contained the program's introduction to the community, that decision must be made at this time. Then the task force must decide on the number of firms to visit. Several factors will influence these choices, including:

- Size of the community
- Number of firms in the industry
- Number of visitors recruited or capabilities of the local economic development team
- Availability of expertise in preparing the research report

In addition, the task force should discuss the inclusion of the local issues questions that were raised in the first hour.

At this stage, the exact wording for these questions is not important, but developing a consensus on the top issues is important. Task force meeting minutes are essential for keeping track of who attended and recording decisions that were made. Don't forget to assign someone to the task of keeping minutes before each meeting.

The meeting should conclude with each task force member being charged with recruiting two to three volunteers for the visitation program and selecting dates for the firm visitor training. To maximize attendance at the training, let the task force pick the best date.

Plan of Work Development

As the guiding document of the BR&E program, the plan of work is invaluable.

Therefore, its content not only must be accepted but actively endorsed by the task force. To achieve this, having the task force members come together to develop and codify the plan of work is desirable. This can be accomplished with relative ease if the number of task force members is fairly small (for example less than 10). If the task force is large, however, having the core leadership team develop a draft plan and then having the entire task force discuss and ratify it at a later date may be of benefit.

Plan of Work Meeting

Participants:

- Leadership team and task force members
- BR&E coordinator or professional

Purpose:

By the end of the meeting, the participants will have:

- Finalized the task force membership
- Finalized the plan of work template (see below)
- Finalized recommendations on the type and number of firms to be visited
- Prepared an agenda for the firm visitor meeting

Distribute in Advance:

- Chapter 4: *Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation*
- Discussion questions for plan of work meeting (see below)
- Plan of work template (see below)

Suggested Agenda (about two hours):

- Finalize task force membership (discussion question 1) ....30 minutes
- Finalize the plan of work (discussion questions 2-4, plan of work template)..........................40 minutes
- Develop recommendations on firms (discussion questions 5 and 6)...................20 minutes
- Prepare agenda for firm visitor training (discussion questions 7-9)...........30 minutes

Discussion of the Plan of Work

This process does not have a more important task than recruiting a strong task force. If the task force represents a broad cross section of the community that is willing to work hard, the program will be successful. Review the Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation and this chapter; finalizing the plan of work will be relatively easy for you. At this point, the primary tasks are coordinating schedules and dates and each leadership team member asking for assistance from the rest of the team as appropriate.

This meeting is essential before training the volunteers. The task force needs to understand the visitation process and agree to do it as a group (even if each person has agreed individually to do it). They also need to finalize the number of firms to be surveyed and how to recruit firm visitors. You can check the Chapter 4: Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation for ideas on how to get good attendance at the visitation training.

Plan of Work Discussion Questions

1. Whom should we invite to be on the task force from each of the following groups?
   a. Business leaders
   b. Development professionals
   c. Local government
   d. Educational institutions
   e. Other community leaders
2. Which member of the leadership team will do each of the tasks shown in the plan of work? (Fill out the plan of work; see the plan of work template on the next page)
3. What tasks will you assist other team members in completing? (Remember, each coordinator is only the leader of his/her primary area, not the whole team.)
4. Do tasks not shown in the plan of work need to be done? If so, what are they, who should do them and when should they be done?
5. How many firms should be visited? (Remember that you need half as many volunteers as firms to be visited, assuming each team visits four firms; two-thirds as many if each team visits three firms and an equal number if each team visits two firms.)
6. What types of firms should we recommend be visited (manufacturing, tourism, retail, mixed sectors, service, etc.)?
7. Will you use commercial survey software, spreadsheet or another method for survey data analysis?
8. What do you think of the suggested agenda for the visitor training? Do any changes need to be made?
9. What date, time and place should we hold the first task force meeting following visitor training?
10. What can we do to ensure a good turnout at the visitor training?

Plan of Work Template

Community ____

Certified BR&E coordinator ____________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Leadership team members assuming the following roles:

Coordinator _____________________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Media relations ___________________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Business resources _________________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Milestone meeting facilitator __________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Visitation director _________________________ Phone ____________ email ______________

Task Force Members:

Business People:

Development professionals:

Local government officials:

Educational professionals:

Other community leaders

Addresses: Attach complete addresses, with phone numbers and email, for each person.

Preparations for the Visitor Training

If these preparations are done, the visitation completion rate will be very high, often above80 percent. While the visitation director oversees this aspect of the program, all leadership team members and some task force members will need to help get the tasks done on time.

Before the Firm Visits Are Conducted

The visitation director coordinates this stage of the program but will need the help of all of the other leadership team members.

Practice Visits	Target Date/Person Responsible
Select date	______________________
Select two firms to visit	______________________
Send firms copy of letter and survey	______________________
Handle immediate follow-up from visits	______________________
Make copies of surveys from practice visits and mail to the BR&E research office	______________________
Find local economic development resources	______________________

Task Force Organizational Meeting

Arrange room with speakerphone	______________________
Who will personally contact whom?	______________________
Mail out notices to task force	______________________
Telephone tree reminder on meeting day	______________________

Preparation for Visitor Training

Secure written endorsement from sponsoring group	______________________
Secure written endorsements from other local groups	______________________
Prepare mailing labels needed for program	
• Firms to be visited	______________________
• Firm visitors	______________________
• Task force members	______________________
Mail notice of visitor training	______________________
Organize telephone tree for contacting the visitors on day of training	______________________
Mail letter and survey to firms	______________________
Arrange meeting room for training (with phone jack and tables)	______________________
Get speakerphone, DVR, TV and computer with LCD projector	______________________
Write a news release on BR&E visitation	______________________
Select date of first task force meeting after firm visits are started for flag review	______________________

Preparations for Media Coverage

The media coordinator writes news releases for the local media or encourages media staff to cover the program at the following stages:

1. Applying for the program ____________________
2. Being accepted in the program ____________________
3. Training the visitors ____________________
4. Visiting local businesses ____________________
5. Following up on industry's concerns ____________________
6. Special-interest stories on unique products or services of local firms ____________________
7. Community commencement meeting ____________________
8. Implement specific recommendations ____________________

Preparations for Immediate Concerns or "Red flag" Review

The business resources leader organizes this aspect of the program (often will call on other leadership team or task force members for assistance). Contact the state/provincial, regional and/or federal agencies on assistance available ____________________

Prepare one- to two-page summary on assistance programs to send to firms after firm visits ____________________

Organize two or three task force meetings for red flag review, starting two weeks after firm visits have begun ____________________

Coordinate red and yellow flag follow-up ____________________

Preparations for Task Force Retreat, Plan Recommendations and Plan Completion

The leadership team organizes this retreat under coordination of the milestone meeting facilitator. This occurs about six to eight weeks after completing the surveys.

1. Make physical arrangements for retreat ____________________
2. Send out written invitations for retreat ____________________
3. Organize telephone network for retreat ____________________

Preparations for Community Input Commencement Meetings

The milestone meeting facilitator organizes the leadership team efforts on this meeting, which is held about four weeks after the retreat.

1. Make physical arrangements for meetings ____________________
2. Send out written invitations for meetings ____________________
3. Organize telephone network for meetings ____________________

Implementation of Priority Projects:

Date of first task force meeting after community commencement meeting ____________________

Preparation and Training for Firm Visitation

While the firm visitation activity is not the only critical component of a successful BR&E visitation program, it is certainly one of the most visible and the one that will define the start of the program to the community. As such, making sure the visits are conducted in a professional and appropriate manner is imperative.

To achieve this, ensuring that **all** volunteer visitors (as well as the local economic development team, if you are using the developer-led approach) understand the process completely is crucial. This cannot happen without the appropriate training, so each person who is going to visit firms must participate in the training, even if he or she had similar (or even the same) training before. Having participants share experiences, tips and concerns is a vital part of the process.

Having the person coordinating the process (this could be the BREI certified consultant or professional) be present for the training also is helpful. While this is the person who likely will be conducting the training, participants can gain a great deal of insight on conducting firm visits from the overall coordinator's experiences.

Preparing for Firm Visitor Training

In areas with BR&E programs, your business retention and expansion professional (BREP) or consultant (BREC) will help you answer questions and coach you in planning this phase, which will save you time. However, you and your team need to do a considerable amount of advance preparation at this stage of the program. Prior to the visitor training, making sure the leadership team participates in one or two practice firm visits is critical.

The term "practice visit" is a bit of a misnomer. These are real visits that gather real information. However, the businesses that are to be visited typically know they are the subject of the team's first visit or two and are willing to work with the team to identify and correct flaws in the survey and process.

As a member of the local leadership team guiding a community through this program, you don't want to be embarrassed during an actual firm visit, so don't skip this step, and as a follow-up to the "practice visit, complete Appendix G: Report on Practice Visits. Each team's report should be compared with other teams' reports at a subsequent visitor meeting to share the good and not-so-good pieces of the visit to make any needed corrections.

What to Do Prior to Visitor Training

The leadership team needs to take the following steps **before the visitor training program**:

- Send the task force and volunteer visitors a reminder letter about the training meeting *(see Appendix H: "*Sample Letter for Recruiting Visitors"*)*.
- Prior to firm visits, send a letter *(Appendix I:* "Sample Letter to Firm") and a copy of the survey to the firms (or this can be done immediately after the training with the names of visitors included).
- Arrange for an experienced BR&E leader to be available (in person or by speakerphone) (optional).
- Prepare news releases about the program.
- Match the visitors into teams if possible.
- Prepare individualized packets for each visitor.
- Make sure a DVD/TV and/or computer with projector and external speakers are available.
- Work on the agenda and assign tasks as a team.

Individual Visitor Packets

You must prepare an individual visitation packet for each visitor. Be sure to include the following items:

- A copy of the firm visitor checklist *(Appendix J)*
- Surveys (one for each firm being visited plus two to four extras)
- Preaddressed, stamped envelopes (enough for one per survey)
- A copy of the letter sent to the firms *(Appendix I)*
- A list of selected firms, complete with the names, addresses and phone numbers of the person to be interviewed at each firm
- A list of the people on the visitor teams who will be interviewing specific firms
- Scheduling postcard addressed to the coordinator *(see page 30)*
- "Guidelines for Visitors" instructions *(Appendix K)*
- Confidentiality statement *(Appendix E)*

Rationale for Visitor Packet Contents

Having extra surveys in the packets is handy in the event the contact person at the firm doesn't have a copy.

To facilitate a timely return of the surveys, include in the packet a preaddressed, stamped envelope for each assigned survey or make specific arrangements for the visitation team to return the surveys to the task force in a timely manner.

Visitors feel more comfortable visiting firms when they're aware of your previous correspondence with the firms.

The list of the firms selected should include a complete description of where the firms are located, not just post office box addresses. Also, include the phone number and name of the firm's contact person. This will improve the response rate by reducing the work the visitors need to do.

Contacting firms soon after they receive the letter is very important. Otherwise, they will forget about it, assume that the project is disorganized or think the visitors don't really care about their firm. Because of this, some visitation coordinators use a scheduling postcard to track whether the visitors are moving ahead. A sample copy is shown below. If the card is not returned within 10 days, the visitation director calls to nudge the visitor or see if something has occurred that requires the visit to be reassigned.

Confidentiality is crucial to obtaining good information. Firms must trust that the information they share will be used only in this program. We highly recommend that all the visitors sign and date a confidentiality statement and a copy of that statement be provided to the firm (*Appendix E:* "Sample Confidentiality Statement").

We have found that few visitors drop out of the program after they attend the training session, but some of the visitors may be unable to attend the session (illness, conflict in meetings, etc.). Therefore, you should recruit about 10 percent more visitors than you need.

If neither visitor from a team attends the training, the team rarely completes its assignments and usually delays the program. Therefore, the team should not be allowed to visit firms. The firms they were scheduled to visit should be reassigned to others. However, **if at least one volunteer participates in the training**, then allowing the team to go ahead probably is OK.

To: Sam Smith, BR&E Coordinator

Re: BR&E Visitation Visits

Our team has made arrangements to visit the following businesses on the following dates:

Business Names	Visitation Dates
1. ____________________	____________________
2. ____________________	____________________
3. ____________________	____________________

We will mail in the survey forms as soon as the interviews are completed.

Team members:

____

____

Sample Scheduling Postcard

Create Volunteer Teams

As a general rule, the easiest way to pair visitors is to ask the task force members to recruit someone to go with them. You might encourage them not to pick a person from their company or organization. Having public employees go with private-sector business people and vice versa is better. It builds understanding between the visitors and better collaboration. This combination gives the firm manager or owner the impression that the program is indeed communitywide and broad-based, adding credibility to the overall effort. Also, the private-sector visitor may be more sympathetic to industry opinions or concerns than the public official.

Additionally, the public official may have more knowledge of local organizations and state programs that can address the industry's concerns.

Match Firms and Visitation Teams

If you have experienced development professionals as part of the visitation teams, we suggest they visit the larger firms because this is usually their area of expertise. The rest of the group can be matched during the visitor training. Prepare a list (in large letters) of the names of the firms and post it on the wall. During a 10-minute break after the first hour, ask each visitation team to sign up to visit two to four firms. If they have a list of all the firms in their packets, they can scan it and decide very quickly which firms they would like to visit. Another option is to have blank spaces by the firm's names and pass the list around for visitors to sign up.

Caution: Visitors should not visit competitors or any firm with which they have a personal association or conflict.

Mail Industry Letters

A few days before the training sessions, mail letters with surveys to all of the firms you have selected for visitation. The timing of this step is crucial to the success of your program. Sending these letters and surveys to the industries just before the training sessions allows visitors to schedule their visits immediately. Having received a letter, the industries will be expecting the visitors' calls. The longer the delay between the letters going to businesses, the training sessions and the calls, the lower the participation rates of the businesses, the lower the visitors' enthusiasm and the weaker your program. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of sending your letters with surveys to the firms within a few days of the volunteer training. A sample letter asking the industry to participate is provided in *Appendix I:* "Sample Letter to Firm."

If a delay will occur between training and firm visits, or if you wish to include the names of the visitors to the individual firms, send the firm letter with the survey immediately after the training.

Mail Copies of Survey to Researcher

If you don't have local staff who can analyze the data and do the survey report and you have to go elsewhere for that service, always copy your surveys with identifying information removed before mailing. Mailing or emailing the surveys in bundles of 10 or so works best for most researchers. **Remember: Always run photocopies or pdf scans of the completed survey with identifying information removed before mailing it to the researcher.** You don't want the originals to be lost, and you will need the surveys for the red flag follow-up.

> "We cannot emphasize enough the importance of sending your letters with surveys to the firms within a few days of the volunteer training."

Firm Visitor Training

Visitors' Role

As previously stressed, firm visitors must attend a two-hour orientation hosted by the BR&E leadership team. This orientation will help the visitors to get to know their leadership team and learn how to interview firm managers or owners effectively. They also will be assigned two to four firms to visit. These visits will require six to eight hours of total time and usually are conducted within a two- to four-week period.

If your community is using the volunteer visitor process, we recommend that firm visitors represent a cross section of professionals from the community, including business people and economic development professionals, ministers, small-business owners, educators, retired business people, young professionals and civic club members. Some programs have involved older youth successfully. Despite this variety, all visitors should be enthusiastic about the program and **must understand the confidentiality of the information they will be gathering**. Local people who are active in the community are usually the best visitors because they recognize the importance of helping improve the community's economy and well-being.

Firm visitors should include people from the public and private sectors. Visitors such as chamber of commerce executives are important to the program because they have the resources, contacts and leverage to address many of the concerns that industry reveals during the visits. Furthermore, the program is more legitimate from the business sector's point of view when your roster of visitors includes business owners and executives from the private sector. A broad base of firm visitors helps ensure that the program is perceived as a community effort rather than a "chamber," "council" or "city" effort.

Generally, firm visitors are instructed to interview the firm owner or operator unless this person will be unavailable for a long period of time. Then they will visit the highest management official available.

Reasons to Participate

People participate in this type of program for many reasons. They include:

- Concern for the economic development of the community
- Fulfillment of their primary job responsibilities (public officials, Extension faculty, development department representatives)
- Desire to become more knowledgeable about local business and industrial sectors
- Desire to become more familiar about the community in general
- Interest in developing and strengthening personal and professional relationships
- Desire to become more active in the community
- Pressure from friends and associates to become more involved in the community

Visitor Training Agenda

The visitation director is responsible for making sure the firm visitor training is done well. While one person can do this training on his/her own, we encourage the leadership team to seek the assistance of an experienced BREI certified coordinator (BREC) or BREI certified business retention and expansion professional (BREP) to help. Not only do BREI certified coordinators and professionals have experience in doing the training programs, but more importantly, they can help you answer questions on any aspect of the program.

Importance of Visitor Training

If you want a successful BR&E visitation program, you must have well-trained visitors. To demonstrate to firms that your community really cares, you need to have a high completion rate, and this requires that the visitors feel comfortable and confident in their assignments. The training program is aimed at helping the visitors be well enough prepared so they have fun on the visits and collect solid information on the firms' concerns.

Even if an experienced BREI coordinator or professional helps you do the training program, you need to understand the process.

A Typical Training Session Agenda

(Total time: roughly two hours)

First Hour: Introducing the BR&E Visitation Program

- Self-introductions by participants.................... 5 min.
- Introduce program .... 10 min.
- Show DVD on BR&E visitation program) ..... 20 min.
- Facilitate small-group discussion..................... 5 min.
- Facilitate question-and-answer period .....10-50 min.
- Break.. 10 min.

Second Hour: Preparation for Firm Visits

- Distribute visitor packets .... 5 min.
- Review visitor packets....................................... 5 min.
- Show and discuss DVD on interview role playing .... 30 min.
- Discuss survey instrument.............................. 10 min.
- Discuss deadline for visits ....10-60 min.

First Hour: Introduce the BR&E Visitation Program

Start the session by briefly describing the objectives of the BR&E visitation program and the importance of the visitors to the program. Then introduce key leaders (the leadership team and task force members). Allow some time for the rest of the attendees to give a brief introduction (name, city, business and/or public office).

Provide an overview of the BR&E visitation process and your impressions of what happened in the practice visits.

Then introduce and show the University of Minnesota Extension Service *Retaining and Expanding Your Business in Your Community* (segment 1); Benalla, Australia[15]; Bridgewater, Canada; or similar DVD for an overview of what a BR&E visitation program is all about. Following the DVD, a question-and-answer period could be held with an experienced coordinator from another program. Hints on how this can be accomplished effectively can be found in *Appendix C:* "Question-and-answer Session With Experienced Local Leader" (optional).

This discussion can be very valuable during the training because it allows the visitors an opportunity to ask questions of someone who already has participated in the program.

Note

Discussion time with an experienced leader is highly recommended because some of the community leaders will have reservations and questions about the program. Until these concerns can be addressed, visitors have difficulty paying attention to the details of their roles.

If you connect with an experienced leader, you may hear some of your participants comment that they wish the question-and-answer period with the experienced BR&E coordinator had come after hour two of the training, when they have additional questions. We discourage you from changing the agenda in this way for two reasons. First, unless you deal with questions about the general goals and procedures of the program before you discuss the survey, then the visitors will ask those types of questions at that time. This can bog down the discussion and the tone may turn defensive. This hurts the visitors' understanding of the survey and results in poorer quality data and a lower response rate.

While you might be able to counter it immediately, often that is not possible without setting off a debate between the two "experts." Second, if the experienced BR&E visitor is on the program in hour one, this gives you time to counter any questionable advice before the end of the program.

Second Hour: Prepare for Firm Visits

After the break, distribute the visitation packets. Spending five minutes reviewing the contents of the packets is beneficial. Pay special attention to *Appendix K:* "Guidelines for Firm Visitors." This appendix outlines the specific steps and approaches each team should take while completing the firm visit. Then have the firm visitors view the

[15] B.E.A.R. (Business Expansion and Retention), Peter Kenyon, Bank of I.D.E.A.S. *www.bankofideas.com.au*

role-playing video in section 6 of the University of Minnesota Extension Service *Retaining and Expanding Your Business in Your Community* DVD[1] to demonstrate these guidelines, (you may wish to utilize *Appendix L:* "Retraining and Expanding Business in Your Community: Role Playing for BR&E Business Visits," and *Appendix M:* "Notes to Accompany Firm Visitor Role Play," while watching the video) or develop your own role-playing exercises with the questionnaire provided by your sponsor.

Review Survey Questions

Discuss the survey instrument while making note of any questions that caused confusion in the practice visits.

Match Team Members

Confirm team matches and ask members to get together immediately following the meeting to check calendars and determine who will contact the firms.

As a final item, be sure to stress to the visitors the procedure for submitting the questionnaires and when they are due *(Appendix J:* "Firm Visitor Checklist") as well as for identifying and noting red flag issues and other firm needs *(Appendix F)*.

All volunteer visitors (including leadership team and task force members) must visit at least two to three firms during the visitation phase of the program. Occasionally, local leaders will insist that visitors should memorize the survey and not take it into the firm for the interview. **You should discourage this.** If you have done the practice visits, you can report on how well the firms you visited received you. You also can avoid attempts to make major revisions in the survey, which can be a major time-killer and energy drain. And finally, you can discover any rough spots in the survey prior to having copies printed.

Keep Visitors Motivated

Get High Attendance at Visitor Training Sessions

If you get low attendance at the visitors training, the quality of the program will suffer. You can take a number of steps to ensure high attendance. Some successful techniques other communities have used include:

- Using lots of newspaper coverage of the BR&E visitation program prior to holding the training *(Appendix D)*
- Sending personal letters to the task force and firm visitors *(Appendix H)*
- Holding at least two training sessions to make the training easier for visitors to attend
- Scheduling the meetings at different times of the day (for example, hold one meeting from 7 to 9 a.m. and the other from 4 to 6 p.m.) to make participation more convenient
- Implementing a telephone calling tree on the day of the workshop (leadership team calls task force members, who call visitors), as well as other types of communication, such as email and social networking media.

Importance of High Completion Rates

Past BR&E visitation programs that have used this approach enjoyed average completion rates of 85 percent. This is very high compared with most survey efforts. For the 15 percent of the surveys that were not completed, about half were due to refusals by the firms and about half were due to visitors being tardy and disorganized.

Having a very high response rate is very important for three reasons:

1. The public relations benefits of the program are directly related to the completion rate. If the visitors do not contact lots of firms, the effort is counterproductive.
2. The quality of the data is better when the completion rate improves. Assuming that the nonrespondents would have answered in the

[1] Kent Gustafson, Elizabeth Templin and Carole Yoho, Minnesota Extension Service faculty do the role playing on the video. The concept for this role playing was developed by Nancy Lenhart, Minnesota Extension Service educator; Clinton Kurtz, president of Citizens State Bank of Norwood; Scott Loveridge; and George Morse.

same way (on average) as the respondents is dangerous. High response rates reduce this problem.

3. Noncompletions can be a signal that you will have difficulties keeping your task force involved in later stages of the programs.

If you appear to have response problems, the leadership team needs to look into the reasons immediately. The team should call its mentor, state sponsor, or BR&E coordinator or professional to discuss this.

Encourage High Survey Participation Rates

Here are steps you can follow to get high survey participation rates:

- Let visitors select the firms they want to visit if possible.
- Use lots of media coverage.
- Keep in contact with firm visitors on a regular basis.
- Meet weekly during the visitation phase to compare notes and explore ways to correct problems.
- Reassure firm visitors experiencing difficulty completing visits that they're only expected to do their best.
- Create a "bandwagon" effect by sending out a letter reporting on progress.

Conclusion

The purpose of this guide was to provide the reader with a basic set of tools for conducting a business retention and expansion visitation program using a proven approach.

Communities have many other factors to consider when contemplating this type of program, and we hope the reader will make use of the variety of resources available. First and foremost is the Business Retention and Expansion International (BREI) professional organization. This association has more than 450 members, many of whom have undergone specific training and continuing education activities to become certified BREI coordinators or professionals. To find out more about the organization or learn about the BREI coordinators or professionals in your area, contact BREI at www.brei.org.

Another resource is your local or regional Cooperative Extension Service office. As a part of your state's land-grant university, this office opens the door to a wide range of resources, including many that can assist with this type of program. The research-based information Extension can provide could be of significant assistance in strategic planning processes, finding or developing high-quality surveys, etc.

Of course, the most important resource is your business community. One of the key factors in the success of this type of program is buy-in by the local businesses and industries you are targeting with your program. A thorough explanation of the program's goals and objectives is necessary. If it is provided, you likely will have widespread acceptance of the effort. Businesses, particularly the small businesses, typically have very little opportunity to express in a collective voice their concerns and needs.

Good luck in your business retention and expansion endeavors!

This publication was authored by Kathleen Tweeten, former director of the NDSU Extension Service's Center for Community Vitality, and Alan Barefield, an Extension professor at Mississippi State University.

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